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ABSTRACT

If counselors are to meet the needs of adolescent clients they must understand the unique perspective of this population. This includes understanding of not only the presenting problem that the client brings, but how adolescents experience the counseling process and counselor/client relationship. The primary interest of the author was what adolescents themselves have to say about their experiences with counseling. Very little has been written on this subject. This article is the result of a review of professional literature which focuses on the adolescent stages of life. The review included the journals "Adolescence," "Journal of Adolescence," "Journal of Adolescent Research," "Journal of Research on Adolescents," and "Journal of Youth and Adolescence" for the last five years. Also examined were "Journal of Counseling Psychology," "The Counseling Psychologist," and "Journal of Counseling and Development" for the last three years. A discussion of the few articles that have been written on this topic is included, along with implications of these findings for counselors and suggestions for future research. (Author)

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Adolescents' Experiences With Counseling:

A Literature Review

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Abstract

If counselors are to meet the needs of adolescent clients they must understand the unique perspective of this population. This includes an understanding of not only the presenting problem that the client brings, but how adolescents experience the counseling process and counselor/client relationship. The primary interest of the author was what adolescents themselves have to say about their experiences with counseling. Very little has been written on this subject.

This article is the result of a review of professional literature which focuses on the adolescent stage of life. The review included the journals *Adolescence, Journal of Adolescence, Journal of Adolescent Research, Journal of Research on Adolescents,* and *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* for the last five years. Also examined were *Journal of Counseling Psychology, The Counseling Psychologist*, and *Journal of Counseling and Development* for the last three years.

A discussion of the few articles that have been written on this topic is included, along with implications of these findings for counselors and suggestions for future research. Citations and a Reference List are also included.

Adolescents' Experiences With Counseling:

A Literature Review

INTRODUCTION

If counselors are to meet the needs of adolescents, they must understand the unique perspective and experiences of this population. Little has been written in the last five years about adolescents and their experiences in counseling. Many of the citations in those articles that have been published in the recent past are from the late 1980's and early 1990's. Most recent research on this topic used subjects from outside of North America. The authors of one article clearly articulate the need for research on adolescent's experiences with counseling stating, "The fact is that we know almost nothing about the experience of therapy for young people and about what within the therapy hour makes a difference to them" (Dunne, Thompson, & Leitch, 2000). Another researcher emphasizes the need as well, "It is important that psychiatrists and other mental health professionals understand how young people with mental health problems perceive health services" (Buston, 2002).

Collecting data from adolescents has clearly been a low priority at the same time that parents, teachers, government officials, and the popular press in the United States have cried out for answers to why events like school shootings and random acts of senseless vandalism by teenagers occur. The current article explores what has been written about adolescent's experiences of counseling, from their perspective. Without question one can find numerous articles outlining specific interventions for young people with specific problems. What one cannot find, however, is research that delineates how

adolescents perceive the counseling experience. A number of questions predominated in the mind of the author as this review was undertaken. They include:

~What do adolescents, themselves, say about counseling services they have received?

~What do adolescents perceive as the barriers to receiving counseling services?

~What are the most prominent presenting concerns of adolescent clients?

~Do adolescents who come to counselors have a clear idea about what is bothering them?

~Do adolescents who come to counseling tell us what they think we want to hear?

~Do adolescents have any interest in challenging what they believe to be adult's preconceived notions of adolescent's problems or in proving us wrong? Are we wrong?

METHOD/PROCESS

This article is the product of a review of professional literature written about adolescents. The first part of the review encompassed five journals which specifically address this life stage; *Adolescence*, *Journal of Adolescence*, *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *Journal of Research on Adolescents*, and *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. The table of contents of these journals, for the last five years, was read and examined by the author, who noted articles addressing issues of counseling in their title. The author was not looking for articles about specific intervention techniques, such as 'a six week therapy group for adolescent offenders,' or 'interventions for adolescents with eating disorders,' but was instead seeking articles that discussed the experience of counseling from the perspective of the adolescent herself/himself. The topics of interest were, "Why do adolescents come to counseling?" and "What do adolescents have to say about counseling services they have received?"

The literature review also included the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *The Counseling Psychologist*, and *Journal of Counseling and Development*, for the last three years noting the same types of articles listed above. Finally, a general search of literature

was conducted of Psych Info and ERIC for 1998-2002 using the search term 'counseling and adolescents.' A whole variety of articles emerged related to specific counseling interventions, with specific populations, for specific issues; these articles were excluded unless the title indicated that the writing in some way informed our understanding of how adolescents experience counseling, from their point of view.

RESULTS

Only seven articles related to the counseling of adolescence, which were relevant to the research questions, were found. Two of these articles related to expectations of, and experiences with, counseling, three were about help-seeking and self and other referral, , and the last two were about the concerns of teens. A variety of articles have been published about teens and counseling which are too narrow to provide a general idea about what works for teens and what doesn't, and these were excluded from this review. Virtually nothing has been written about what adolescents themselves have to say about the counseling process and their experience of it.

Of the two articles identified that address the subject of what adolescents say about counseling services, one studied only male subjects from an all-boys school in Ireland (Dunne, Thompson, & Leitch, 2000). The authors' motivation for their research, quoted in the introduction to this article, parallels that of the current author. Dunne, et. al., while using only 11 subjects, found that some of the experiences of adolescents in counseling were similar to those reported by adults, such as the helpfulness of both cognitive and affective events. They further found a "strong emphasis the male adolescents placed on the act of talking itself" (Dunne et. al.), which was contrary to findings on adult's experiences with counseling. The second article, Adolescents With

Mental Health Problems: What Do They Say About Health Services?, notes that "…the qualitative experience of diagnosed mental health problems amongst young people…" has been "particularly poorly researched" (Buston, 2002). The 32 young people used in Buston's study participated in semi-structured interviews on their "views about the health care they had received" (Buston, 2002). The primary diagnosis of the subjects ranged from Eating Disorder to Obsessive Compulsive Disorder to Depressive Disorder to 'no clear diagnosis.' Buston categorized the responses of the participants and further coded them as positive or negative. The breakdown of responses appears below.

CATEGORY	POSITIVE	NEGATIVE
Doctor-patient relationship	37	45
Treatment	11	24
The system	7	10
Environs of the hospital/clinic	7	24

(Buston, 2002).

Three articles on the subject of help-seeking and self and other referral were found. Moshe Tatar reports the results of research "comparing counsellors' and adolescents' perceptions of adolescents' considerations for self-referral to a professional counselor" (Tatar, 2001). The subjects were Israeli. Tatar found that both counselor and potential adolescent clients believed the trustworthiness of the counselor was the most important factor in whether or not the adolescent will seek counseling. Differences that emerged included counselor's beliefs that adolescent's characteristics and presenting problem were both more important to self referral than the adolescents reported them to be. Adolescents reported the perceived expertness of the counselor to be more important in their consideration of self-referral than counselors believed it to be (Tatar, 2001).

In another study of adolescents and self-referral, Raviv et. al. investigated the difference between adolescent's willingness to refer themselves, as oppose to another adolescent, to

a counselor for a similar problem. Their subjects were also Isreali. The researchers found that,

> -girls were more willing than boys to refer both themselves and others
> -adolescents referred others more often than themselves
> -adolescents were more willing to refer both themselves and others for severe as oppose to minor problems (Raviv, et. al., 2000).

The third article is entitled Impact of Attitudes and Suicidal Ideation on Adolescents' Intentions to Seek Professional Psychological Help (Carlton & Deane, 2000). The authors predicted that higher levels of suicidal ideation would lead to increased incidents of help-seeking. The participants in this study were New Zealanders. The authors found that although their subjects were "more likely to seek help for "suicidal thoughts" than for a "personal-emotional" problem," they also found that "As suicidal ideation increased help seeking intentions for suicidal thoughts decreased" (Carlton & Deane, 2000). The authors note a possible explanation, that perhaps suicidal adolescents have more difficulty than non-suicidal adolescents in problem solving and solution-identification (Carlton & Deane, 2000).

The final two articles were about the concerns of teens. Although they do not shed light on our understanding of teen's experiences in the counseling setting and relationship, they do nonetheless illuminate our understanding of the differences between what adults think adolescents are worried about, and what adolescents themselves report being concerned with. This is an important distinction for counselors for at least two reasons. First, without an understanding of what is really of primary concern to this group of clients, we may misperceive adolescent's issues, and thus address the less important ones in the counseling process. Second, when we see that there are differences between what adolescents say is bothering them and what adults think is bothering them,

we gain a clearer understanding of the differences between these two populations and a clearer understanding that we must not base our interventions with teens solely on what adult's report works for them.

In their two articles, published a year apart, Kathryn Boehm and her colleagues discuss the results of their investigations into what teens report as being their primary concerns (Boehm et. al., 1998; Boehm et. al, 1999). Their 1998 article reports research results from Ohio and their 1999 article reports on data gathered from four geographic regions of the United States. They note that in previous research it was found that "adults believed teenagers were more concerned about high-risk behaviors than the teenagers themselves reported being" (Boehm, et. al., 1998). Examples of the high risk behaviors include substance use and sexual activity. In Teen's Concerns: A National Evaluation, the authors list the personal concerns reported by teenagers themselves (Boehm, et. al., 1999). The top issues reported were peer relationships, family problems, just to talk, sexuality, abuse, and school problems. Their data shows that the concerns adults believe to be primary for teens-those involving risky behavior-are not the same as those reported by the adolescents themselves. This finding could have important implications for the way in which an adult counselor approaches an adolescent client and her/his problems.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

This investigation set out to determine what is known about what adolescents have to say about their experiences with counseling, and why they seek counseling. The most disappointing finding is the dearth of writing on this topic. If we are truly interested in preparing young people to live lives of sound psychological adjustment we must

certainly be interested in improving our services to them. Without knowing how they experiences counseling services any improvements we make will lack wholeness.

A few conclusions can be drawn from the little that is known. An important implication of Tatar's work is that counselor's develop and maintain a reputation of trustworthiness among their potential adolescent clientele. The means of establishing and maintaining such will be partly determined by the environment in which the counselor works, be that a school, clinic, or outpatient counseling agency. This point is further supported by Buston who concludes, "The major theme to emerge from these interviews is the value placed on an understanding and supportive clinical relationship" (Buston, 2002). Further illumination is provided by Raviv et. al. who have demonstrated that adolescents perceive enough value in counseling to refer peers, and that we have some work to do in helping them feel more comfortable referring themselves. Carlton and Deane enlighten our understanding of the interplay between suicidal ideation and help-seeking among adolescents. As is evident by the findings of Dunne et. al., counselors must not assume that the experiences of counseling for adolescents is similar in all ways to that of adults and must not base their interventions only upon what works for adult clients. Finally, Boehm et. al. add further support to our understanding of the differences between adolescents and adults by showing us that the issues bothering adolescents are not always what adults think are the primary concerns of young people. The implication for counselors of Boehm et. al.'s research is that we must be ever vigilant in ascertaining the true presenting problem of our adolescent clients and not be guided by what we, and other adults, think are their most pressing worries.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The miniscule selection of professional articles addressing the subject of adolescent's experiences with counseling is a clear indicator that there is work crying to be done in this area. There is no question that obstacles to be overcome when conducting an investigation with minors as subjects, especially when the research questions evolve around counseling and the very personal nature of therapy and the issues clients bring, are many and varied. In fact, the author of this paper worked in vain to gain approval for one such project at the very time of this article's writing. This must not be a deterrent, however, if we are to serve young people. If aiding people at this life stage is not motivation enough, parents, teachers, counselors, law-enforcement agencies, government officials, among others, are crying out for assistance to help adolescents adjust more successfully to life in our ever-evolving cultural landscape. In addition, if one seeks a practical reason for assisting young people to successful adjustment, one need only calculate the future cost of not resolving psychological issues early in life. Should counseling professionals not be in the forefront of providing some of this help? Questions to be investigated include: What are the main reasons adolescents seek counseling? Once they come, what is their experience in the client/counselor relationship? What counseling interventions are effective and which ones are not? Are there differences in these dimensions based on race, gender, and socio-economic status of client and counselor? When they don't come, what do they perceive as the barriers to receiving counseling services? When they cope with their problems without the help of counselors, what means do they use? How effective are those other means? If we can understand these issues, we can develop appropriate interventions for adolescents that are

commensurate with their needs. In so doing, we will be better able to help young people grow into emotionally and psychologically healthy individuals, become psychologically healthy adults, and assist in the creation of a generation who live lives in a state of mental wellness.

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